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The Theme of Parental Love and Self Esteem In Morrison's The Bluest Eye

Abstract: Toni Morrison's The Bluest Eye, the first of her novels, is a tale of a fragmented black family. The novel presents a distorted and shattered picture of parenthood. There is a mother and a father who fails to love their daughter because of their self-created false and misleading measures of beauty which culminate in the tragedy of their daughter, Pecola. The mother, Pauline and the father, Cholly Breedlove are born and raised in a racist society. Their black colour distorts and spoils their self-identity, turning them into a disgruntled self, finally leading to estranged family relationships. Their failure to love and respect their own self makes them incapable of lavishing the same feelings to their family and loved ones. Through the tragic story of Pecola Breedlove, Morrison tries to explore the theme of importance of

familial love in children's life and how the absence of this factor can cause horrible damage in their lives.

The novel establishes the fact that parents play an irreplaceable role in the lives of their children. This vital relationship positively impacts a child's physical, mental, and emotional well-being. In the novel, Morrison tries to explore the impact of racism on the psychological well-being of her characters. On being find themselves unaccepted by white hegemony, the parents themselves are not proud of who they are and thus unable to provide their children with a strong sense of self. The purpose of this paper is to establish the link between importance of parental love and self-esteem in a child's life.

KEYWORDS: Belongingness, love, Parental Attachment, Parent- Child Relationship, Psychological wellbeing, Self-identity,

As children develop from infants to teens to adults they go through a series of developmental stages that are important to all aspects of their personhood including physical, intellectual, emotional and social. The role of parents is to provide encouragement, support and access to activities that enable the child to master key developmental tasks. Functioning as a coach, the parent exposes a child to age appropriate challenges which helps the child to explore on their own and learn from interacting with their environment. Many studies have demonstrated the benefits of parental affection for a child's self esteem and coping skills. Findings show that the children whose parents convey affection, acceptance and support are likely to report higher self-esteem, lower anxiety and depression. Parent-child affection made a big contribution to filial self-esteem in late adolescence and early childhood and provides long term psychological benefits for children. This paper is an attempt to find out how close relationships-and an individual's psychological well-being are co-related and what kind of short term and long term consequences these contributions may have. Family love is crucial

for the right emotional and psychological well-being of the offspring. When the parents are not affectionate, the children also fail to love themselves. If the parents are not proud of themselves, their children are likely to lose their self esteem. As per Karen Horney's theory on anxiety, Pecola's spoiled personality is a result of anxiety which grows from disturbances between children and parents. According to Horney, environmental, social and family relationship played a very important role in the development of the normal and abnormal personality:

....the feeling of a child of being isolated and helpless in a potentially hostile world.

A wide range of adverse factors in the environment can produce this insecurity in a child: direct or indirect domination, indifference, erratic behavior, lack of respect for the child's individual needs, lack of real guidance, disparaging attitudes, too much admiration or the lack of it, lack of reliable warmth, ...injustice, discrimination....and so on.

(Horney, p. 41)

This research paper studies to measure the negative influence of Pecola's parents on her self esteem. Pecola lacks the parental love and security in her life which is her natural right as their child. After being dominated by the prevalent socio-cultural practices of white hegemony society, Pecola's parents fail to develop a meaningful understanding of their self and the same legacy they gave to their child, Pecola. It is unbearable for an eleven year old little girl to face the refusal by white society, black society and her own parents. She received negative responses from white community and even from her own community. Unfortunately her own family fails to give her positive atmosphere at home. Her parents who are not proud of themselves fail to provide the child with a positive sense of self. All she needs is love and emotional support from her family and community as well to regain her self-appreciation. Breedloves as parents fail to give their children the love and the security which are essential for a child to his sense of belongingness. They hate their blackness and transmit the same despise into their children. Their dislike for themselves made them to believe:

They were ugly.....No one could have convinced them that they were not relentlessly and aggressively ugly. Except for the father; Cholly, whose ugliness was behavior, the rest of the family-Mrs Breedlove, Sammy Breedlove, and Pecola Breedlove wore their ugliness.....although it did not belong to them. (The Bluest Eye p-28)

Cholly and Pauline Breedlove, the mother and the father are themselves confused about their identity as both of them hailed from fractured families. Cholly suffers the rejection of his father. He develops hatred for his black self when found by two white hunters in the midst of his sexual act and insisted to complete the act with them as audience. Finally he takes refuge in alcohol. His life of in-authenticity is evident in his sadistic love making and the violence and brutality of domestic relationship. The ultimate manifestation of his confused state is his vicious and tragic raping of his daughter during a confused moment of tenderness and hatred. Pecola's rape by her own father is a manifestation of the social, psychological and personal violence that Cholly together with his wife heaped on Pecola. He was a father "who has built up a family devoid of love and tenderness". (Louis Mendy, p.774) Instead of protecting his family, the father was more concerned with his alcoholic beverages and sexual intercourses. Even her mother refuses to believe Pecola simply to give the impression that Breedolves still hold together. Her mother's not believing Pecola is simply due to "lack of true maternal love and protection that any little girl that has gone through such a nightmarish incestuous act needs". (Louis Mendy, p.780) As the little girl always feels unloved by her family, she loses her self-esteem.

Pauline' efforts to look like white actress Jean Harlow eventually lead her to "collect self contempt by the head". (The Bluest Eye p-95) Harlow's penetrating glance from the silver screen confronts the unpolished, unsophisticated Pauline; reminding her of her unfinished self. Finally she finds refuge in the household of a white family as a domestic. Her in-authenticity

is evident in the hatred she shows towards Pecola who accidentally spills a berry cobbler on the Fisher's clean white floor. Instead of caring for Pecola, Pauline scolds her; showing more concern for little white girl and the clean floor. Through her mother's blurred vision of the pink, white, and golden world of Fishers, Pecola learns that she is ugly, unacceptable, and especially unloved" (The Bluest Eye p-27) Pauline's own family becomes a secondary thought before the white Fishers: She wore him (her husband, Cholly) like a crown of thorns, and her children like a cross"(The Bluest Eye p-98).

When parents feel good about themselves, they are much better able to extend this positive sense of self to their children. They can engage in activities, relate to, and offer their children support from a place of confidence and ease. Attachment plays an important integrative role in developmental theory. Parental attachment refers to an affective tie between child and his parent. A secure attachment in early childhood creates a more supportive and harmonious atmosphere which helps in making a child more compliant, cooperative and responsible. Young children are motivated with the expectations of parents.

On the one hand we have Pauline, the mother who is dominated by the cultural practices of governing society, and contrary to this, we have the strong character of Mrs. MacTeer who knows how to value her own self in order to nurture the values of self- respect and self-appreciation in her family members. She believes that her values shall teach her family how to survive amidst the challenging social environment. Pecola who is a victim to the trap of false values set by her mother is juxtaposed to another girl Claudia who educates herself from the former's devastating physical and emotional condition and learns to find modes of sustenance in restricted environment. These contrasting studies of strong female characters to the weak characters present an understanding of the factors shaping their as well as their daughter's

personality. To add to this, the trauma of slavery combines with their low-esteemed self-regard to worsen the display of emotional powers while interacting with the external world.

Pecola is a victim of these conflicting situations in which an insecure and anxious child likes to get its space either by being aggressive or submissive. In this case, she subjects her own identity to the deceitful measures of beauty devised by her mother. Pushed by these factors, she tries to chase an unrealistic ideal of beauty. Her yearning finds its articulation in her tragic aspiration to have blue eyes. The tragedy of Pecola dramatizes the deep and ill effects of her desire for blue eyes which she took as panacea for all her problems. The story of Pecola is the story of many Pecolas who live in America and suffer from the inherited inferiority complex, carrying the burden of their broken spirit and disintegrated self.

By portraying the characters in a state of psychological distortion, the novelist presents various facets of destruction and degradation suffered by black families due to social abandonment. The traditional meaning of home as a place of safety and security has changed for the Breedloves. Rather, it functions like a place for the detached. There was absence of love and warmth in the Breedlove family. This factor restricts them to connect with their own inner world as well as with the outer world. It renders them incapable in lending a meaningful structure to their fragmented lives. They become passive to self-derision:

You looked at them and wondered why they were so ugly; you looked closely and could not find the source. Then you realize that it came from their conviction. It was as though some mysterious all knowing master had given each one a cloak of ugliness to wear, and they each had accepted it without question. (The Bluest Eye 28)

Pecola is denied the opportunity to acquire the range of experience that allows her growth of personality and a positive sense of self. Thus, Pecola is not properly and adequately initiated to the true worth of the individual. Love starvation and the utter isolation from a community, which defines individuals by their physical appearances deprive her from gaining any means of self expression (114). The role of community in shaping one's personality can certainly not be overlooked but the overwhelming influence on the personality of a person is that of the family.

Since the MacTeers are not obsessed with the whim to be beautiful or to follow the white middle class Dick-and-Jane family rubric, they concentrate their efforts on providing occupation, housing and health care for the family. Penury may have blunted their joy and made life an everyday struggle, yet they show strong parental interest, concern, and warmth towards their children. Morrison focuses on the importance of parents and family in the psychological and mental development of a child. Through Cholly and Pauline, Morrison suggests that parents who emerge from histories of oppression might reproduce that degradation within the family unit. Instead of providing for and protecting his family, Cholly fails in providing to his family a safe and congenial environment. It is not just the loss of family, but the loss of nation's affluence and security.

In spite of being poor, the MacTeer parents hang on to familial and communal values. Mr. and Mrs. MacTeer share a positive, stable relationship with each other. They did not fight about who was supposed to do what. Since the MacTeers are not obsessed with the whim to be beautiful or to follow the white middle class Dick-and-Jane family ideals, they concentrate their efforts on providing occupation, housing and health care for the family. Penury may have smashed their joy and made life an everyday struggle, yet they show strong parental interest, concern, and affection towards their children. The MacTeer girls are just as vulnerable victims as Pecola to the culture of white aesthetics. But they protest positively because their parents

develops in them a positive self-concept and high self-esteem. They become survivors with their identities intact. Like Pecola, they are handicapped with life-draining poverty and confusion of who they are as people and how they fit into the racist structure of the society. Frieda and Claudia, however, know how to fight against the racist and sexist attitudes of the community, which makes them aware of their own unworthiness.

In a marked contrast to Pecola's surrender to the alien culture, Claudia is bent on self-definition and self-assertion. She fights to "counteract the universal love of white baby dolls, Shirley Temples, and Maureen Peals" (p. 149). Instead of receiving a white baby doll as a Christmas gift, she prefers spending time with her grandparents. The good times she spends in their kitchen provides her physical and spiritual nourishment. She treasures "—Big Mama's kitchen and —Big Papa's violin" (p.15). Such warm interactions have instilled in her the possibility of a world of "—security and warmth"(p.15) that will never be available to Pecola. Frieda's coping skills are also demonstrated when she confronts a gang of boys taunting Pecola in the schoolyard. Mr. MacTeer is a dutiful parent. He accepts his responsibility as the provider and emotional sustainer for his family. Warm, rewarding father daughter relationships play a vital role in helping a girl to value her womanhood and to move toward a positive acceptance of herself as a woman. The MacTeer girls love and value their father. Mr. MacTeer, too, loves and values them. As a result, the girls are more comfortable with their feminineness and with their relationship to others. Mr. MacTeer is the protector of his girls that Cholly Breedlove can never be: "—Wolf killer turned hawk fighter, he worked night and day to keep one from the door and the other from under the windowsills" (p.47). He feels proud of his daughters when Mr. Henry admires them. But he also gets aggressively protective when he learns that Mr. Henry has tried to molest his daughter; Frieda.

Mrs. MacTeer is a strong mother who prepares her daughters for the ups and downs of life and specially the life of a coloured woman. She teaches her daughters the art living and

equips them with survival tools. She gives her children enough love and a robust sense of security and self-worth so that they do not get entangled in white values. Her composure in the midst of a strenuous struggle for survival serves to nurture and to push her children to the mainstream. She endures the battle which Pauline loses. She is a model for growth and self-realization for her children who bravely deals with tough times and has the courage to sing about their situation and overcome it by repossessing it and creating her own version of it (116). Mrs. MacTeer is a traditional mother and wants to guard her daughters against wicked individuals and their own untimely sexual desires. She is genuinely concerned about inculcating sexual values in her daughters and enforces strict moral code in them.

Through the MacTeers, Morrison shows that despite having to battle hostile circumstances, a black family could save itself from becoming the victim to white society. This feat is possible only through orientation of strong familial ties. The congenial emotional environment at home allows Claudia and Frieda to rise above the smallness of their surroundings. They “—[struggle] to consolidate [their] weakness and hang on...[and] creep singly up into the major folds of the garment” (p.11).

Both the parents did not experience real love in their childhoods and their married life is devoid of any sign of the same. Love and self-esteem are transmitted to children from their parents to great extent. If parents fail in doing so, most children are likely to live the same horrors as the poor little girl. Family is of crucial importance, as it can play a vital role in safeguarding its members against the onslaught of hostile external forces. The love and bonding of family function as an antidote to stress. The MacTeer family emerges as the triumphant because its familial ties and values. The MacTeers demonstrates that challenges of life can be buffeted only by the psychological, emotional and material support of the family. The MacTeer parents provide for their children, even though each day is a battle to be won. The strength they impart to their children ensures the entire 129 family’s well-being

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